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BEECHER'S PERSONALITY.

IN the nature of things, men of genius are incomprehensible by the ordinary mind in exactly the direction and measure in which their gifts and powers excel those possessed in common by the rest of mankind. Nor can genius of one description appreciate or comprehend its exhibition in others unless it be of kindred nature. To Carlyle, Liszt was a fool. An Edison cannot view an Emerson with clearer ken than an ordinary man. Grant might know Napoleon, but neither of them could grasp a Shakespeare.

To Henry Ward Beecher common consent unhesitatingly ascribes the possession of genius. Nor was that genius of any narrow or restricted variety. It was both moral and intellectual. In the latter sphere also it presented many forms and phases. It was oratorical, linguistic, poetic, humanitarian. He sounded all the depths of emotion, all the heights of inspiration. As an analyst of character he was as great as was Shakespeare as a synthesist. As a student and reader of nature he could have rivaled an Agassiz or an Audubon. In wit and humor he was the peer of the most celebrated. In short, history records no man who outranked his fellows in more directions, and to a greater extent, and who fell below the average in fewer elements and developments of mind and soul. Hence, it is evident that no single biographer can justly estimate the character nor more than partially portray his life. As, from various standpoints, from different sides, under everchanging conditions of sky and air, and with widely diverse powers of observation and capacities of feeling in those who gaze upon its awful form, Mont Blanc presents to each beholder a form perceived by no other, so do men of great and varied genius stand related to their fellows. One glimpse of the mighty mountain may suffice to awe and entrance the stranger. But one must live under its shadows, in every vale that sleeps at its feet ; must study it in storm and sunshine, at each hour of the day and year ; must tread its snows and glaciers ; must scale its rocky sides, and stand upon its summit, and, even then, can know

Mont Blanc only according to his own capacity. And so, in the estimate of such a man, numberless friends and acquaintances, each from his own standpoint, and with his own receptivity, may have studied Mr. Beecher, may have comprehended him as they could, and may formulate their ideas of such a multiform genius, but not one, even of his intimates, can rightly and fully depict him. But from all such sources combined the world must derive its estimate of him, and, in time, will come to know, and understand, and appreciate his nature and character as fully and justly as he can be known.

Entertaining such convictions, I have ventured, in a very imperfect and fragmentary manner, to describe Mr. Beecher as I have seen and felt his influence during the past score of years. And, though my appreciation of this great nature be but narrow, yet as, in some particulars at least it is one of which no other person is capable, I venture to record my impressions. Of their positive or relative value others must judge.

I shall attempt to speak only of his physical and intellectual nature. To others, far better qualified, must be left a consideration of his moral genius.

Had the world to-day a record of the mere physical appearance of Shakespeare, it would doubtless prove exceedingly interesting. And though, through the press and the photograph as well as the recent presence of the subject of this sketch in many parts of his own country, and in England, his physical peculiarities are well known, it may not be superfluous to note them here. Aside from his face, Mr. Beecher would not have attracted marked attention in a crowd. His figure was short and compact. Although but five feet eight inches in height, his weight for several years had averaged about two hundred and twenty-five pounds. But his flesh was so well distributed that he did not appear clumsy nor obese. His carriage was erect and noble. His complexion was florid, and his smoothly-shaven face and white locks contrasted finely with it. His hair was somewhat thin, but to the last it fully covered his head. It was allowed to grow to the collar, and was swept behind the ears. His head was not extraordinary in size,* measuring only twenty-three inches in circum-

* He wore what is called a $7\frac{1}{4}$ hat, and prominent dealers inform me that the number most frequently sold is $7\frac{3}{8}$. Each one-eighth represents one-half inch of circumference.

ference, but his massive face and features gave it an appearance of greater bulk. His forehead was rather retreating than bold, except that the brow was full. His eyes were prominent and seemed large. They were grayish blue in color, and so perfect were these organs as to require no artificial aid, even for protracted work. The upper lids were full and overhanging—a formation which has been noted as characteristic of many distinguished orators and actors. His nose bore a fair proportion to the rest of his features, and presented no marked peculiarity of form. His mouth was large, and the lips neither full nor thin. They closed firmly. The cheeks were full, quite remarkably so beneath the ears, which latter organs were well formed, and set far back upon the head. The chin was somewhat square, and gave a determined look to his face. His expression was exceedingly varied. Never was there a more mobile countenance, nor one that more quickly and decisively responded to every emotion.

Numerous photographs of him exist, but no two afford the same expression. His neck was large and short. The chest was full and capable of great expansion. His digestion was uniformly good, and afforded him a plentiful supply of generous blood, without which the functions performed by his brain would have been largely inhibited. The blood vessels of his entire frame were extraordinarily capacious for a man of his temperament. This latter might be classed as a mixture of the lymphatic and sanguine, with a dash of the nervous. The arteries and veins of his scalp were nearly double in size of those of an ordinary man, and if one might judge from the coldness of his extremities during mental labor (a constant and often distressing phenomenon) it would seem probable that those of his brain were correspondingly large. In his habits he was very regular and temperate. He early ascertained what was hurtful and what beneficial to him, and he carefully conformed to the latter. This he did, not from selfish concern for his comfort only, but, as is well known by his intimates, because he would not sacrifice on the altar of appetite what belonged to his duties as a minister of Christ. No man “brought his body under,” to use the words of St. Paul, more rigorously and vigilantly than he.

He was immoderate only in sleep. This he must, and would, and did obtain in generous proportion. In the full tide of work an afternoon siesta was always insisted upon, and he could com-

pose himself to peaceful slumber even amidst much confusion. He was not "valiant at the trencher," but ate well and carefully. To coffee he was devoted, and it served him well as a stimulus and paratropic—never rendering him nervous. Of mild ales and wines he partook sparingly, and only when he deemed them essential for his health. Like most great actors and singers, he ate very lightly before speaking—a cup of coffee or tea, with a scrap of toast only. Afterwards, he was ready for substantial food.

Few men of sedentary occupation suffered less from functional disorders, but he took far more exercise and relaxation than the majority of his class. His tastes were so various, and so freely indulged, that they compelled bodily exercise for their gratification. Saturday was his holiday, and he knew how to take one, and get as much out of it as any school-boy. When at home, it was spent in the picture galleries, museums, concerts, spectacles, or shops of the great city. There can be no doubt that such a happy temperament, such varied tastes, and such habits as resulted from them, very largely contributed to keep his health of both body and mind in their usual perfect condition.

From his farm in Peekskill, where he buried much money, he reaped a precious harvest, not only of health, but rich stores of mental and moral pabulum. Never was there a better or more largely paying investment, and well would it be for our clergy and their congregations did they emulate his example. Trips to Europe and the mountains are well enough, but close contact with the life-giving bosom of old mother nature in her fields and gardens is the "more excellent way." In early years he suffered much from frequent attacks of quinsy, but during the past decade they were easily arrested. Bilious attacks were not uncommon, but he made short work of these by sleep and starvation. To hay-fever, however, he was annually obliged to succumb, unless he resorted to the White Mountains or to distant journeys. With these exceptions he enjoyed remarkable health. The tastes to which reference has been made were various and innocent, but were, for the time, many of them, veritable passions. All his life long he was a thorough and intelligent bibliophile, and he accumulated books until his residences would hold no more. His library contains many rare and beautiful works, and numbers about 15,000 volumes. Of gems, too, he was passionately fond. He was accustomed to say that they afforded him the same kind of pleasure

that he derived from flowers, and that they excelled the latter in that they were fadeless. Their purity and color had a never satiating charm for him. Thousands of dollars he lavished upon them. His yellow diamond, of the purest canary color, has a European pedigree and history.

Not a stone with which St. John has embellished the walls of the Holy City was missing from his collection. It is doubtful if he was ever without unset gems in his pockets, which he would often exhibit for his own delectation or that of his friends. He haunted the shops of jewelers, and often borrowed from them gems of great value, in which he fairly reveled with delight. He took the greatest pleasure in those of richest and most gorgeous hues, the ruby, the opal, the carbuncle, the emerald, etc. Indeed, color, its shades and combinations, whether in nature or art, appeared to engage his fancy rather than form, although to perfection in this regard he was ever acutely sensitive. Hence his love for painting, rather than for sculpture. Never shall I forget the delight he took in the Russian wedding feast lately exhibited in New York, nor how earnestly he enjoined it upon me to visit it. Of all paintings, at home or abroad, he best loved the Sistine Madonna, and even his eloquent tongue failed to express the emotions he experienced when he stood before it. In engraving and etching he was a connoisseur, and many rare examples of this class of work were in his possession. He accumulated these, and paintings also, until the walls of his home failed to accommodate them. At one time he made a collection of stuffed humming-birds and birds of paradise, which was beautiful beyond description. Exquisite also, as well as extensive, was his accumulation of *bric-à-brac* and of *faiience*: within my knowledge only the Morgan collection surpasses it. Even that, though far more costly, does not equal it in tasteful selection. Although no musician, harmony and melody enraptured him. Often he sought in them rest, elevation, and inspiration, and found them all. When consistent with his duties, he was a devoted and discriminating listener in concert and opera. For the combinations and varieties of color exhibited in the productions of the loom he had a fancy which was freely indulged. No lady of taste could derive more satisfaction from a shopping expedition than he. From his recent visit to England he returned laden with spoils of this description for his relatives and friends—silks and plushes and velvets fit for a queen.

But more than all these, his soul reveled in nature and her productions. Each spring was a regeneration to him, and he watched for her coming as the sick long for the morning. By no means insensible to the joys and beauties of winter, it was the birth and growth and fruition of the seasons that brought him ever fresh delight in their course. Regarding trees, it is enough to say that upon his thirty-six acres in Peekskill there stand to-day more than six thousand varieties of purely ornamental trees, interspersed with fruit of every variety that can be forced or coaxed to grow in this climate. Rare shrubs and flowers of every kind and hue and shape and fragrance diversify the landscape and load the air with perfume. Horses, cattle, bees, and fowls of choicest breed were equally sought.

And superadded to all these tastes was a comprehensive and exact knowledge of all the objects that ministered to them. Whether they were books or gems, works of art or productions of nature, he studied and learned and knew their origin and habits, their habitat and training, the processes involved in their production, whence and when and how and why, so far as books or experts in each department could inform him. And from each and all he drew much of the inspiration, as well as illustration, that glowed in lecture and sermon—in prayer and praise. He lived close to the great throbbing heart of nature, and she whispered her secrets in his ear. He haunted, the factory, foundry, furnace, and machine shop, and studied their processes. No engineer, mechanic, or artisan but his thirsty soul pumped dry at every opportunity. His was a child-like nature in many ways, and, like a boy, he was ever eagerly inquisitive and insatiable. But with the indomitable persistency of a man he hunted the world for the achievements of art and science, and the facts and phenomena of nature. Nay, he hesitated not to plunge into and investigate the so-called supernatural. And mixed by the alchemy of that wondrous brain, interwoven with fancy, and wit, and philosophy, and theology, he poured them forth in floods of emotion and illustration and poetic imagery. As the dull iron enters the magnetic fluid, and emerges lustrous with pure gold, so the soberest fact, gilded by his imagination, became radiant, beautiful, enchanting. I have spoken of Mr. Beecher's wonderful memory for facts of the foregoing description; equally wonderful was it in regard to persons and their history. But this faculty is common amongst

great men. Singular to relate, however, his memory, in some respects, was phenomenally deficient. Phrases, sentences, isolated terms, dates, items, were absolutely forgotten as soon as heard. The only thing of this sort that he could recall was the list of Latin prepositions that govern the ablative case. This he could repeat with all the linguistic facility of the Major General in the opera. Not a couplet of any hymn, though sung in his ears and by his tongue for a lifetime, not a passage of Scripture, not a scrap from the most celebrated authors or orators, could he quote with even a probability of accuracy.

Doubtless this was at least one of the reasons for his most wonderful versatility of expression. One may read his sermons and prayers, and though his ideas may be and are repeated, they are always clothed afresh ; no set phrases, no quotations are to be found. The titles of his lectures remained the same, but their substance and language underwent constant change. The currency of his mind was always golden, but it was fresh from the mint and stamped with a new device at every issue. How largely this was attributable to the forgetfulness referred to, and how much to his marvelous gift of language, may be a question, but concerning the facts there can be no discussion.

Upon the peculiar methods of his mind, and upon the sensitiveness of his organism, as well as upon his strong common-sense, the following interview sheds considerable light, and it will be regarded by many with no little interest. I called upon him professionally, at his request, on June 14th, 1873, and he made to me the following statement :

" My general health is better than usual at this time of the year. I think I have come out of my labors, and through the unusual mental strain and excitement of the past winter, with more than my usual vigor. The subject upon which I wished to consult you is in respect to my mental state.

" Emotion with me works inward, not outward, often till it seems as if there were a vast gulf formed by it within me. My intellectual efforts are intuition, to a large extent. A sermon seems spread out before me like a picture, into which my brain seems to open out, and inspired by which I preach. All this is customary and normal, but latterly, as a result, I think, of mental strain, there has come upon me a peculiar experience which I clearly recognize as illusional, but which, nevertheless, is very real to me. I retire at night, and sleep well until about 4 A. M., when I am startled from a sleep which has been dreamless by hearing my name called ; and I lie awake, hearing, distinctly and with apparent reality, voices calling me in the sweetest and most inviting tones. Nothing of terror is experienced ; on the contrary, my moral state is the most blissful and entrancing. I seem to be on the very borders of Heaven. Now, while this is the case, my judicial reasoning self lies there perfectly aware that this is all hallucination, and the outworking of

an overwrought and overstrained brain. I seem to have a double existence, as if another self were beside me in the bed—one perfectly sane and recognizing the other as abnormal, and the other under the full sway of these illusionary perceptions—as well satisfied with their reality as if they truly existed. Now, I have yet four weeks of labor before I can go to grass for the summer's rest, and I want to be sustained so far as may be during them.

“Something of the sort has come to me when in a fever. Then my being has seemed to become a noun of multitude, my feet seemed a tenement-house full of insubordinate tenants whom I endeavored to control in vain. Each separate part of me was an individual, and all in discord. But the most curious imagination has been that I was a locomotive, all fired up, and impatiently waiting for the engineer who would come to start me.”

To some it may be interesting to add that this hallucination was quickly dispelled by the administration of Cannabis Indica, or Haschish, as it is called in the East. To all, it is an autobiographical exposé of the workings of this marvelous intellect, and the sensitiveness of this harplike organism, while it also demonstrates the sound substratum of common-sense which recognized at once the cause of his condition, and sought in medicine for its cure.

As a wit, Mr. Beecher shone most brightly in repartee, and in this faculty lay one of the great secrets of his fame as an orator. Without this he would have been less sure of success, to say the least, when he “fought with the beasts” in Liverpool, and London, and Richmond, and wherever else he had to confront an audience of enemies. Let him once turn the laugh upon an interlocutor, as he never failed to do, and his cause was won. His blows of this description were always fair and honorable, and he took a fair return with the utmost good humor. No man ever angered him in debate. And this characteristic, with his indomitable courage, brought even the most stubborn and malignant opponent to his feet not only, but made from his fiercest enemy often a warm and lifelong friend. His humor was so spontaneous and irrepressible, so honest and wholesome, it bubbled out of him so readily, and (as it sometimes appeared to pious souls) so *malad-propos*, that, though it not seldom affronted such ill-trained spirits, it formed one of the most effective and often the most trenchant weapon in his armory. In private life this feature of his mind rendered him a most brilliant conversationalist, and brightened the life of all around him. When he could lay aside all restraint in the company of his intimates he often appeared as full of fun and mischief as the most rollicking boy. Hundreds of his letters exist of which the following is a fair example :

“**MY DEAR DOCTOR :** The world, in turning over, a few weeks ago rolled

on my right leg, and it has been somewhat sore ever since. To-day it is not swelled, but it refuses to take its ease when walking, and sulks and behaves unseemly. My wife laughs at me and says it is rheumatism—which is absurd—as I have not been in any way exposed to it. Gout, it is not, I know. I don't want to preach to-morrow on one leg. Can you suggest any mode of bringing the ailing member to good behavior. Yours hobblingly,

“HENRY WARD BEECHER.”

But upon this side of his character I need not dwell. It was too obvious and universal to need further consideration here.

But who would dream that in such a bright, courageous nature, that in an orator who had proven his power so often, and under such conditions, there should lurk a vein of shyness, self-depreciation, and self-disparagement. And yet it was there. He has told the writer that when he first came to Brooklyn, and people began to praise and make much of him, he could not be persuaded that their estimate was not too flattering; and so strong was this feeling in him that he often took by and unfrequented streets to avoid meeting with acquaintances. He also informed me that when he appeared in public where other speakers preceded him, he often felt, while they were addressing the audience, such an admiration for their powers, and so certain that he could not compete with them that, had it been possible, he would have abandoned the attempt. But once upon his feet, hesitation and doubt vanished. As he himself told me, he went to confront his Liverpool audience with trembling and prayers and even tears. But once before them, said he, “I felt as if the whole Atlantic Ocean were under my feet, and I knew I could conquer them.” His courage there and elsewhere, under like circumstances, was grand and sublime.

Discussion has often been rife as to which of his great speeches was the most effective. The whole series of addresses in England, in 1863, his lecture in Richmond, his address in the Academy of Music in Brooklyn on the occasion of the reception of Parnell, as well as others, were magnificent exhibitions of oratory. But in my opinion (one in which I am sustained by high authority and the ripe judgment of many) the most sublime efforts of his life were those which were made upon the spur of the moment before the Advisory Council on February 18th, 1876. They are to be found recorded on pp. 240, 255 *et seq.* of the printed proceedings of that body.

My reasons for these opinions are as follows: It is a simple matter for an orator to sway an audience in general sympathy

with him. Next to this, for Mr. Beecher, it was easy to subjugate and control a gathering of his enemies. But to rise without premeditation before a deliberative body, composed, for the most part, of critical theologians, of judges who upon the bench had long ago exhausted all that life has to give of emotion, and were habituated to regard only the dictates of dispassionate reason, of men who, though not avowed enemies, were, many of them, under the influence of suspicions directed against his moral character—to rise as he did, upon the instant, and, within a few moments, hold every mind and soul within his easy grasp, to sweep the whole gamut of feeling, and sway them as the wind plays with a field of wheat—ah! that was sublime and God-like power.

And, just here, it may be worth while to remark that he always spoke *ex tempore*, and, as it might appear to some, with inadequate preparation. It was his custom always to write out the heads of his morning discourse after breakfast on Sunday morning. And an equally brief preparation was made for his evening sermon. Nor were his lectures more elaborated. He was a truly inspirational speaker, and his moods of mind and body, the state of the weather, and all exterior circumstances were reflected in his addresses as clouds are mirrored in the lake.

Mr. Beecher's nature was frank, generous, and trustful to a fault. He was incautious even to heedlessness. He could not understand nor be made to believe that he could have an enemy who would lie in wait to trip him, and glory in deceit. To men of the world, of prudence and caution, he appeared reckless in the extreme. Many have wondered at the friends he at times confided in. In this respect let him speak for himself.

“I am the child of a noble mother and of a noble father, and I was brought up in an austere morality, in a pure and unblemished household, with a most reverent honor for truth, for duty, for love. And to me has been given a nature for which, whether it be prudent or whether it be not, I am not questionable. When they rebuke the vine for throwing out tendrils and holding on to anything that is next to it, whether it be homely or handsome—whether it be dry or full of sap—then they may rebuke me. When you shall find a heart to rebuke the twining morning glory, you may rebuke me for misplaced confidence: you may rebuke me for loving where I should not love. It is not my choice; it is my necessity; and I have loved on the right and on the left, here and there, and it is my joy that to-day I am not ashamed of it. I am glad of it, and if I had my life to live over again, and were to choose between cold caution, calculating every step, without trust and confidence in man, I would, with all its liabilities, choose to be generous, to be magnanimous, to be truthful, and to lean, though some one should step aside and let me fall to the ground.”

Noble soul ! here was the charity that “ thinketh no evil ! ”

Nor, though once ensnared by devils who plotted his ruin, did he ever lose his faith in man, nor bate one jot of his openness, his frankness, his generous confidence and trust in his companions and friends, and to-day a world weeps at his funeral.

It would be possible to enumerate and illustrate many other distinctive peculiarities of this wonderful man : his wide benevolence, his forgetfulness, utter and absolute, of injuries which would, in most, have incurred a life-long resentment. His most malevolent enemy had but to show a sign of relenting, and his great heart was ready and eager, not only to throw the mantle of forgiveness and forgetfulness over the past, but to take him into fresh and hearty confidence and affection. Said one of his parishioners to me, “ I had not spoken to a man for years because he had so grievously insulted Mr. Beecher, when, to my unbounded surprise, I one day met them coming down the street arm in arm.”

Of his heroic endurance and silent uncomplaining suffering under agonies which a soul less sensitive than his cannot begin to conceive, others can speak more eloquently than I.

Whether it be true that imagination is the basis of faith, and that capacity for the latter depends upon the development of the former in the individual, one thing is certain : no more brilliant and vivid imagination was ever bestowed upon man, and no one ever possessed stronger or greater certitude of faith. It was implicit and all pervading ; it was at once his glory and his joy ; it bore him above all forms of trial and suffering ; it gave him sublime courage in danger ; it enabled him to welcome death with smiles.

Well has it been said that to know this man was not only to admire and enjoy him, but to love him with an affection that in every true and honest heart grew deeper and fonder with every hour, every day, every year.

W. S. SEARLE, M. D.